

MIGRATION, RESETTLEMENT AND THE SPACES IN-BETWEEN:

A STUDY OF SELECT SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANT LITERATURE

BIBHUDATTA DASH¹ & DHISHNA PANNIKOT²

¹Research Scholar, School of Management, National Institute of Technology Karnataka, India

²Assistant Professor, School of Management, National Institute of Technology Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT

Migrant narrative is a literary genre worth examining as it projects associations with real life images that a person undergoes while transgressing geographical and cultural boundaries which has larger implications in the present. Migrant experiences are unique as they include memories of the past, struggle for resettlement in the present, and hopes for the future. In the process of resettlement, migrants have to deal with the spaces that they come across and often end up in exile within their inner self. Dreams, nostalgia, isolation, and exile of migrants are the aspects worth research and analysis. This study analyses select South Asian migrant writings to understand the scope of studying migration and the migrant experiences in detail.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Resettlement, Nostalgia, Space & Exile

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is the product of the experience of writers as socio-cultural beings in spatiotemporal parameters. In the writings of migrant writers, “we see the reflections of their personal experiences as migrants that include the dichotomies, states of fluidity, conflicts, and instabilities.” (Dash and Pannikot 2016: 64) The narratives written by writers which deal with the life of migrants are called migrant literature. This paper aims to study the aspects of migration like – Migrant Dreams, Nostalgia, Space, and Exile in select South Asian migrant narratives of Bapsi Sidhwa, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali.

DISCUSSIONS

Migration is the process of geographical relocation of individuals from their homeland. People essentially migrate for better prospects. The dream of a better place and better life, acts as the major pull factor for migration. These dreams are essentially a product of the migrant’s perception of the host country. In *An American Brat*, Feroza repeats to herself, “‘I’m going to America, I’m going to America!’ until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty, too, caught the rhythm of her happiness. To the land of glossy magazines, of “Bewitched” and “Star Trek,” of rock stars and jeans...” (Sidhwa 1993: 27). Feroza’s excitement shows her perception of a glossy America that makes her migrate. In *Oleander Girl*, Seema is equally thrilled at the prospect of living in America: “She was delighted, too, at the prospect of living in America, of having the chance to walk the magical streets that had popped up so many times on her screen in the call center” (Divakaruni 2013: 96).

Ironically, once the migrants get resettled in the new land, they realise that the dreams that they chased for were not as promising as they thought them to be; they come with their own terms and conditions into which the migrants often don't fit in. When they reach the new country to settle in, they get surrounded by a feeling of unbelongingness. After facing the interrogation at the airport upon her landing in America, Sidhwa's character Feroza feels: "She was in a strange country amidst strangers" (Sidhwa 1993: 54-55). These experiences create a gap between the migrants and the people of the host country. The migrants live away from their homelands in a space where they culturally do not belong; that makes them isolated and exiled in the new found land; and they fall back on the memories of their better past.

In the process of migration and resettlement, past becomes a significant part of the memory of migrants. Often when migrants see cultural resemblances in the foreign land, they get a sense of nostalgia. In *An American Brat*, when Feroza sees "a room filled with Eastern miniatures and Persian rugs," she gets reminded "of the museum in Lahore", which makes her ache with nostalgia (Sidhwa 1993: 127). In *The Lowland*, When Subhash sees the coastal landscape at the Rhode Island, he gets reminded of the lowland near his home at Calcutta: "As strange as it sounds, when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home. I think of lowland, of paddy fields" (Lahiri 2013: 43). In *Oleander Girl*, when Korobi listens to Bollywood songs, loneliness falls on her "like snow over an empty field (Divakaruni 2013: 97).

The memory of migrants is constituted not just by places of the past, but also by people and other cultural elements of the homeland. Absence of family members makes it difficult for the migrants to live in the new country. In *Brick Lane*, Ali's protagonist Nazneen often misses her sister Hashina, who lives in Bangladesh. To bridge the gap, she writes letters to her from London. In *An American Brat*, Feroza feels nostalgic and homesick when she remembers the people of Pakistan: "She missed her grandmothers, her parents, their friends, her friends, her ayah, the incessant chatter of her cousins, and even the raucous chorus of the Main Market *mullahs* on Friday afternoons." (Sidhwa 1993: 162). At times the sense of isolation becomes so bad in the new land that, migrants start living in their world of imagination where they believe their dear ones are near them. In *The Lowland*, Subhash lives in the Rhode Island: "As if his parents were watching him, monitoring his progress, and he was proving to them that he was not wasting his time" (Lahiri 2013: 67). In America, Divakaruni's character Seema misses "having friends who would have understood her pangs of homesickness, who could have taught her easy American substitutions for Indian dishes..." (Divakaruni 2013: 96); whereas Lahiri's character Ashima, during days of her pregnancy, unable to find her favourite snack in America, prepares "a humble approximation" of it to satisfy her Bengali palate. (Lahiri 2003: 1)

Like Ashima, Sidhwa's character Aban feels nostalgic remembering her family after the birth of her son Dilshad: "Poor Aban had missed out on the seventh and ninth month pregnancy ceremonies and the gifts and clothes and family jokes that went with them, and now she would be deprived of her baby's "Sitting" and "First Step" ceremonies. What a fuss and stir little Dilshad would have caused in Lahore or Karachi, the grandparents vying to look after and the aunts competing for her attention, everybody lavishing gifts" (Sidhwa 1993: 314-315). For them, delivering the baby in America is like moving away from the tradition of generations. These situations make the migrants feel the geographical distance in a stronger manner, thereby making them nostalgic and isolated in the new land. Migrants wish to return back to their homelands but their situations do not allow them to return in most cases. In *Brick Lane* Ali's character Nazneen who is exiled between her family responsibilities in London "did not want to run, but neither did she want to sit still" (Ali 2003: 102). She felt as if a "shapeless nameless thing...crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless" (ibid).

In the process of migration and resettlement, often a space gets created between the migrants and their relationships that they have left behind. Migrants often hide about their mishaps in the new land from their parents; as they believe, it helps them to live without giving any explanations and at the same time it saves their parents from unnecessary worries. In *An American Brat*, Manek does not mention about his accident to his mother Khutlibai: “This had happened almost a year ago, but he had not written home about it. It would only worry his mother. Feroza guessed that it had been more an assertion of his fierce need for independence – the challenge to cope, to fend for himself – than any inordinate concern for Khutlibai” (Sidhwa 1993: 102). Gradually the space between migrants and their parents broadens with time, and with time even parents lose interest in knowing about their children. The space becomes hard to fill. In *The Lowland*, after Udayan’s death, when Subhash returns from America, the behaviour of his parents startles him: “Through one of the grilles he saw his parents, sitting on the top floor. He strained to see their expressions but could make out nothing. Now that he was so close, part of him wanted to return to the taxi, which was backing out slowly. He wanted to tell the driver to take him somewhere else.... His parents asked no questions about America. Inches away, they avoided looking Subhash in the eye. He wondered whether his parents would ask him to remain in Calcutta, to abandon his life in Rhode Island. But there was no mention of this” (Lahiri 2013: 90-95).

On the other hand, in *Brick Lane*, Chanu’s relatives believe that everyone in London is full of wealth. They cannot see the hardships that Chanu has to go through on a daily basis in the process of sustaining his life in London: “‘The begging letters still come,’ said Chanu. ‘From old servants, from the children of servants. Even from my own family, although they are not in need. All they can think of is money. They think there is gold lying about in the streets here and I am just hoarding it all in my place. But I did not come here for money. Was I starving at Dhaka? I was not. Do they enquire about my diplomas?’ he gestured to the wall, where various framed certificates were displayed. ‘They do not...’” (Ali 2003: 35). The space between Chanu and his relatives grows with the passage of time, thereby making his miserable life more miserable.

Space is also seen in romantic relationships of the migrants. Like their lives, their relationships also suffer due to distance, cultural differences, and uncertainties. Most times they end up like the relationship of Gogol and Moushumi in *The Namesake*; Feroza and David in *An American Brat*; or they end up unexpectedly like Subhash’s relationship with Holly in *The Lowland*: “You’re young. You’re going to want to have your own children someday. In a few years you’ll go back to India, live with your family. You’ve said so yourself. She had caught him in his own web, telling him what he already knew. He realized he would never visit her cottage again. The gift of the binoculars, so that they would no longer have to share; he understood the reason for this, too” (Lahiri 2013: 82).

Thus, migrants become captives within themselves. They are exiled with the memory of things they know but no longer see, and they wish to return to their homelands. We get to see this situation in *Brick Lane*, when Nazneen remembers her village: “The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could smell it. More often she tried to see and could not. It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman’s net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw. (Ali 2003: 217).

CONCLUSIONS

According to Monica Ali: “The pull of land is stronger even than the pull of blood” (Ali 2003: 32). The cultural differences, geographical distance, and nostalgia make ‘the pull of land’ stronger for the migrants. They do their best to facilitate the journey back home; their only ambition becomes “to scrape together enough money to afford the journey back home” (Ali 2009: 517). But on the contrary, it is ironic that even if they return to their homelands, they no longer fit in that old space. Ali’s character Dr. Azad’s situation represents this condition of migrants in *Brick Lane*: “‘Every year I thought, ‘May be this year.’ And I’d go for a visit, buy some more land, see relatives and friends and makeup my mind to return for good. But something would always happen.... And I’d think, ‘Well, maybe not this year.’ And now, I don’t know. I just don’t know.’” (Ali 2003: 33). Homeland is beautiful for migrants because it is a part of their imagination. When they go back in reality, they are no longer able to fit into the lifestyle that they had left behind. They feel like strangers in their own lands. They remain exiled in the condition of in-betweenness, where they belong to nowhere.

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